

# THE LOW TABLET - IN REMEMBRANCE OF ED LOW

by  
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Over a year ago I had a call one evening from a man who asked me whether I appraised artifacts. I told him I did and he said he had one he wanted appraised. I asked him what this artifact was and he told me it was an engraved Adena tablet. Since there are a number of fake Adena engraved tablets on the market, I thought it fair to warn him that there was a possibility that it may not be real. He responded very assertively and said "By... this one is real - I found it myself" I then asked him his name and he said "My name is Ed Low." Connecting the name "Low" and an engraved Adena tablet, I said you're the man who found the Low Tablet in Wood County, West Virginia. He said "That is correct-how did you know that?" I told him that anyone interested in the Adena culture was well aware of each of the rare engraved tablets. I then apologized to him for casting aspersions on his famous find. Our conversation continued and we talked for nearly an hour.

He told me about loaning his tablet to the Ohio Historical Society in the 1970s and that he had talked with Raymond Baby and Martha Otto at that time. He told them he didn't want to donate or sell the tablet but would leave it on loan if they wanted to display it. They did not give him a receipt for it and he signed no papers of any kind. He was emphatic about retaining ownership of his rare find.

He told me that the appraisal had to do with his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his tablet which had been on loan to the Ohio Historical Society for several years. They had told him for some unknown reason that they had to have an appraisal before they would talk to him about his tablet. Since the tablet belonged to him, I thought that was a strange request, but I agreed to appraise it. I told him, however, that since I was *persona non grata* at the Ohio Historical Society, he would have to make arrangements for

the time and date.

But first, some history on the Low Tablet. Ed Low found the tablet on a sandy hilltop in Wood County West Virginia when he was twelve years old. He and some friends were playing soldier and were digging trenches when he found it under about 12 inches of soil. He kept the tablet all through school and while he followed a career in computer technology later in life.

After moving to Columbus in the 1970s he saw an article in the Columbus Dispatch about Adena engraved tablets which pictured Raymond Baby, then curator of archaeology at the Ohio Historical Society. He called Baby to tell him about his tablet. He said that Baby, over the phone, scoffed about its being genuine but that he could bring it to the museum and he would look at it. After Baby saw the tablet he became very interested and asked Low if he would



**The Ed Low Tablet**



*The Wood County, West Virginia tablet. Divided into quarter sections it depicts four raptorial birds. It is the only tablet with four bird designs. Human faces are formed where design elements meet.*



allow them to put in on display, to which Ed agreed. Ed was emphatic that he did not want to donate it to the Ohio Historical Society but would allow them to have it for display only. There was no mistake about his intentions and both Baby and Otto understood the conditions under which he loaned it to them. Later, an article appeared in the Columbus Dispatch showing Baby holding Ed's tablet. The article did not say that Ed had donated the tablet to them. After the article appeared, Baby called Ed and asked him if he wanted to sell it which Ed said he did not. He told them that his dream was to donate it to a museum in West Virginia where the tablet was found and where Ed was born.

*Curiously, for an organization which has routinely acquired and taken ownership of thousands of donations of valuable property on behalf of the State of Ohio—and for the benefit of all Ohioans they gave him no loan papers to sign nor did they give him a receipt for such a rare artifact. He signed no documents. They sent him no letter of thanks or even acknowledgement of his loan. Ironically, in what must have been an instance of overwhelming generosity, the Ohio Historical Society later sent him a one year membership to their organization worth about \$25.*

Ed felt secure in the fact that the Low Tablet still belonged to him and that it was still on display. In 2007 he was happy to learn that a new state museum was planned for Blennerhassett Island in West Virginia and thought it was time to get his tablet back. It had been found in the Blennerhassett area and Ed wanted to make a gift to the new museum of his tablet as a legacy from his family to the people of West Virginia. It would then be back where it belonged.

However, Ed did not know the Ohio Historical Society. His calls to the Ohio Historical Society were not returned. After repeated calls, letters and other communications to the Society—all of which were ignored—he gained an audience in the fall of 2007 with Martha Otto, Rachel Tooker, James Strider, and OHS Director William Laidlaw. He told them he wanted his tablet back—which at that time was not even on display. Laidlaw informed Low that the tablet belonged to the Ohio Historical Society and that they were prepared to fight Low's claim to ownership with what was described to Ed as "roomful of attorneys". In Ed's words "I was dumbfounded since I had never signed a single paper or given them any idea that I wanted to donate the tablet to them. I had no choice but to take legal action."

After obtaining an attorney, Ed Low wrote a letter to Governor Ted Strickland outlining the facts of the case and asked for his help. There was only an acknowledgement of the letter.

This is where I entered the picture at the request of Ed Low and his attorney for an

appraisal of the Low Tablet. As required by me, they had obtained a date to examine the tablet at the Ohio Historical Society at 2 pm, November 30, 2009. I have mentioned in the past the animosity and threats against me by the Ohio Historical Society and thought it best to not go alone to their museum. I asked George Colvin, our Society Vice President and a graduate geologist, if he would accompany me, which he happily did. I examined the tablet, measured it, and photographed it front and back and from several angles. George also took photographs. I was interested to see whether they would try to impose the \$25 per picture fee they had earlier told us was required to picture any of "their" artifacts. Nothing was said perhaps they were leery about charging such a fee in a litigation situation.)

Before going any further, I must give some background on Ed Low. Ed was a fine, exceptionally intelligent man and a gentleman in every respect. He had spent a successful career as a computer expert and, among many other accomplishments, had built and flown his own airplanes. Ed had come from humble beginnings in West Virginia and since he and I were around the same age we talked a lot about our childhoods. We both had an old-fashioned sense of knowing right from wrong and that when someone looked you in the eye and told you something, you could believe it. Alas, this is a quality which is rare in today's world where greed and dishonesty are a means to an end if one can get by with it. Even though he said little about it, Ed's health was not good and he had been in the hospital a number of times.

He and his wife Dorothy visited me. Ed did not know a lot about engraved Adena tablets except what the Ohio Historical Society had told him so I showed him casts of several other Adena tablets and even a cast of his own Low Tablet which had been made and sold by the Ohio Historical Society. I told him of the mystery about these exceedingly rare objects and explained some of their symbolism. The more I told him, the more he became determined to retrieve his property.

This brings us to the case of Edward Low versus The Ohio Historical Society. Low is suing for return of his tablet, monetary damages, fraud, punitive damages and trial by jury. In response, the Ohio Historical Society hired the law firm of Squire, Sanders and Dempsey to represent them. Squire, Sanders and Dempsey has the reputation of being one of the most prestigious law firms in the state of Ohio and the cost of their services are commensurate with their reputations. Strangely, the Ohio Historical Society, who derives around 70% of their money from Ohio taxpayers, and who has recently fallen on hard times because they cannot justify their expenditures with the state legislature, is spending the hard-earned money of Ohio taxpayers to defend a case that they cannot sustain if there is

any fairness at all in the justice system.

I pause here to present a logical scenario with regard to the Low Tablet which could have easily prevented this confrontational—and undoubtedly illegal—situation from arising. Wouldn't it have been easier for OHS officials to sit down with Ed Low and say

*"Mr. Low, we know the tablet belongs to you and you are justly proud to have found it. But isn't there a possibility that we could work out an arrangement with both you and the West Virginia Museum wherein we could, with your approval, jointly display and study your rare piece? For example, nine months a year in West Virginia and three months a year with the Ohio Historical Society?"*

Ed Lowe is an educated and reasonable man and I have no doubt that such an arrangement could have been worked out.

But this did not happen and the suit has been filed and depositions have been taken. In her deposition, Martha Otto admitted that they had no paperwork of any kind showing that Ed Low gave them the tablet. When asked why not, she said that they often accepted donations to the Ohio Historical Society without paperwork.

The suit is now pending and it appears that many months will elapse before it is heard by a jury.

It is interesting to note that the Ohio Historical Society has been the recipient of numberless collections of items of history and prehistory including artifacts, automobiles, airplanes, real property, books, and a myriad of other objects since they were formed in the late 1800s. In nearly every instance these rare and valuable donations were given for the benefit of the people of Ohio. Their donors believed they were giving them to the State of Ohio. However, the Ohio Historical Society will tell you, if pressed, that the ownership of these items now belongs to the Ohio Historical Society, and not the State of Ohio. They will also tell you that they are not a state agency—they are an independent, self-governing organization responsible to no one—not even the State—and your property has been given to a private organization.

## Epilogue

Tragically, Ed Low died in September of this year. He told me shortly before he passed away that if something happened to him, he had made provisions for his wife Dorothy to carry the lawsuit forward. Perhaps someday both Ed and the Low Tablet will rest easier.